

# **Factors That Influence a Foster Child's Decision To Extend Commitment with the Cabinet upon Reaching 18 Years of Age**

**Penny Butler, Roy McCoy, Clem McStoots and Kim Wilson**

**Kent School of Social Work, University of Louisville**

## **Abstract**

This research study examined factors influencing the decision to extend commitment to the Cabinet by adolescents in foster care. The random sample was selected from those in the foster care population who were 18 years of age between January 1, 2004 and December 31, 2004. Of the 100 charts sampled, 50 had decided to extend commitment and 50 had rejected this option. Both qualitative and quantitative data will be organized and refined in order to identify commonalities. Information obtained from this study will be used to identify factors that influence the decision of children in foster care to extend their commitment with the Cabinet.

## **Qualitative Study**

The qualitative study examined 4 youths who turned 18 between January 1 and December 31, 1986. Charts were randomly selected from the original 69 charts utilized during the quantitative portion of this study. Of the 4 youths, 2 were girls and 2 were boys. Researchers did not review human subjects. Data was organized by identifying themes and commonalities among the 4 youths.

Placement changes and disruptions occurred frequently among all youths involved in the study. The reasons for disruptions were mainly due to out of control behaviors exhibited by the youths. Three of the youths had multiple placements including hospital placements, foster home placements, facility placements, and emergency shelter placements. The remaining youth stayed in the same placement for 19 months.

Recordings involving independent living coordinators were often missing and little information could be obtained from the few recordings that were available. Although recordings often alluded to the fact that the child was having regular contact with the independent living coordinator, the coordinators themselves rarely documented their involvement with the child. Contacts with the child's social worker appeared to be a positive influence in all of the cases involved, with 2 maintaining regular contact with their workers.

Two of the youths received above average grades with the remaining youth either failing or suspended from school. Most of the children exhibited negative and out of control behaviors at school, had difficulty relating to peers and were resistant to authority. Three of the children had either been expelled from school or had been placed in an alternative education program.

All of the children had received some form of individual or group therapy. The common theme among the youths was that they were angry and didn't feel loved or wanted by their families. All of the families either visited sporadically or didn't bother to visit at all. The children would go for extended periods without any contact from family members. Documents revealed that all of the

children wanted contact with their family, however most of the families only wanted limited contact with the children. The children often felt unloved and abandoned. In turn, the children displayed out of control behaviors, anger, and resistance to authority with the end result being disruption of placement in many circumstances.

Education appears to be a common factor in the youth's decision to recommit. All 4 of the children extended commitment with education being the reason stated for recommitting in all 4 cases. Encouragement from support systems along with incentives such as a free college education, access to health care and transitional housing funds appears to have a positive impact.

Literature supports a positive relationship between increased incentives and the decision to recommit. This area of study may be significant as it has the potential to influence the delivery of services, namely the independent living program. Both the individual and society will benefit if steps are taken to increase self-sufficiency and decrease the number who will seek public assistance after aging out of foster care.

### **Findings**

- 36 of 69 youth extended their commitments; 33 aged out of foster care
- Average number of months in out of home care prior to turning 18: 45.7 months
- Number of placements ranged between 1 and 29: 45 had 5 or fewer, 12 had between 6 and 10, 6 had between 11 and 15, 4 had 16-20, and 1 child had 29 placements.
- Average number of case managers was 2.5.
- Girls were more likely to carry a diagnosis of depression and were significantly more likely to graduate high school than boys. Girls were more likely to work part-time while in foster care. Girls were more likely to be in permanent relative custody.
- Of those who did not complete high school, boys were more likely to obtain a GED. Boys on average spent 49.3 months in out of home care compared to girls who averaged 42.2 months. Boys were more frequently diagnosed with ODD than girls.
- Relationships were identified between 1) number of placements and number of case managers; 2) number of placements and status (extend/age out); 3) substance abuse and status (extend/age out); & 4) educational achievement and status (extend/age out).
- Trends were identified between 1) reason for entering out of home care and status offenders; & 2) employed while in foster care and educational achievement.
- Maintaining contact with family of origin was found to be comparable for those who extended (22 of 34) and those who aged out (23 of 27).

### **Limitations**

- Little information is available on youth who choose not to extend their commitments.
- Sample was to be 100, however only 69 were identified that met sampling criteria.
- Systematic error occurred in not being able to choose more than one option for a variable.
- Systematic error occurred in failure to fully define “medically fragile.”
- Generalization to larger populations is not empirically supported due to differences in foster parent training, resources, variations in independent living programs.

### **Explanation of Limitations**

Several limitations were identified in the course of this exploratory research. A sample of 100 youth, 50 who extended and 50 who did not, was the goal, however only 69 were identified that met sampling criteria of turning 18 during the calendar year 2004. Generalization to larger populations is not empirically supported due to differences in foster parent training, resources, variations in independent living programs.

Little information is available on youth who choose not to extend their commitments, which would be beneficial in attempting to identify factors that influenced a youth’s decision not to extend their commitments. This resulted in little data being obtained in the “did not extend” section of the questionnaire. Systematic error occurred in not being able to choose more than one option for a variable in the data set. Many youth entered foster care for more than one reason and, similarly, many youth had more than one mental health diagnosis. Some youth entered foster care due to beyond control behaviors; therefore, status offender should have been included as an option in the reason for entering care question. The quantitative questionnaire did not include an option for currently in high school and did not provide high school student as an option for those who extended their commitments. This limitation is significant in that many of the youth who did extend did so in order to complete high school. Systematic error also occurred

in researchers' failure to fully define "medically fragile" and thus different definitions were utilized by researchers in the data collection process. Because definitions were inconsistent, any findings associated with medically fragile have reduced reliability. The questionnaire contained inquiry as to whether or not an ILP had been completed and did not allow for partial completion to be indicated.

### **QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS**

The quantitative study examined 69 youth who turned 18 during the calendar year 2004. Of these 69 youth, 36 extended their commitments and 33 elected to age out of foster care. The average number of months in out of home care prior to turning 18 was 45.7 months. Boys on average spent 49.3 months in out of home care compared to girls who averaged 42.2 months in out of home care.

The number of foster care placements ranged between 1 and 29: Of 68 youth (1 missing), 45 had 5 or fewer placements, 12 had between 6 and 10 placements, 6 had between 11 and 15 placements, 4 had 16 to 20 placements, and 1 child had 29 placements. The long-term effects of abuse and neglect appear to surface with youth in out of home care, resulting in a high number of placements. This feeds the cycle of minimal attachment, bonding and stability for youth, which results in placement disruptions. Workers report ambivalence in youth changing personal goals impulsively and with little thought or planning. Stressful life events appear to increase placement disruptions, out of control behaviors, excessive anger, and issues with authority. The average number of case managers was 2.5.

Girls were more likely to carry a diagnosis of depression than boys, while boys were more likely to be diagnosed ODD than girls. Girls were significantly more likely to graduate high school than boys, while boys were more likely to obtain a GED. Girls were more likely to work part-time while in foster care.

Research reveal comparable numbers between youth who extended and maintained contact with their family of origin (22 of 34) and those who aged out and maintained contact with their family of origin (23 of 27). In 7 cases where parental rights were terminated, the child maintained contact with family of origin. This is consistent with national research. Of the 5 youth in permanent relative custody, 4 extended their commitments while 1 did not. Girls were more likely to be in permanent relative custody than boys.

Relationships was identified between 1) the number of placements and number of case managers; 2) number of placements and extend/age out status; 3) substance abuse and extend/age out status; and 4) educational achievement and extend/age out status. Further exploration is warranted to more accurately determine the nature of these relationships that can be supported by research. These findings are consistent with the literature review conducted for this research project in presupposing that multiple placements and multiple case managers increases likelihood of negative outcomes for foster children. Similarly, the literature supports finding a negative relationship between

substance abuse and extending one's commitment, as well as a negative relationship between educational achievement and choosing not to extend commitment.

Trends were identified between 1) reason for entering out of home care and status offenders and 2) employment while in foster care and educational achievement. The trend found between status offenders and reason for entering care may demonstrate the long-term effects of abuse and neglect. It appears that employment while in foster care is positively related to educational achievement. This finding has potential for use in improving outcomes for youth by perhaps encouraging youth to work part-time while in care. Those youth who were employed while in foster care were less likely to have a mental health diagnosis with the exception of depression (4 of whom were employed and 5 of whom were not). It is unknown if mental health diagnosis prevented a youth from working or, conversely, employment decreased mental health diagnoses. This, too, warrants further study. This area of the study may be significant as it has potential to improve outcomes for youth with minimal financial requirements.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

By identifying factors that influence a youth's decision to extend their commitment, areas to improve delivery of services may be specified, particularly in the areas of independent living skills and the provision of foster with relation to youth who will turn 18 while in foster care. This is consistent with the social work Code of Ethics that mandates providing services to those in need and advocating for social justice. The individual child and society as a whole will benefit if the self-sufficiency of children who turn 18 while in foster care is increased.

This study suggests that enhancing direct services to a foster child to develop goals and avenues to attain those goals would be beneficial. Services specifically addressing beyond control behaviors leading to multiple placements, if begun immediately upon entering care, may decrease the number of placements a child experiences. Increased focus on independent living programs and education is indicated as potentially increasing the success of youth who turn 18 while in foster care, simultaneously assisting youth in setting and pursuing goals. Addressing the long-term effects of neglect and abuse through ongoing mental health services appears indicated as well.

It is recognized that it is no easy task to improve the delivery of services in foster care cases. Placement options are often limited and based on availability rather than best possible match for a child's needs. Each child is an individual and each case has a different set of circumstances. Formal and informal support systems vary. Resources for provision of services are often limited in availability and may not be precisely tailored to a child's specific needs.

Consistent with the goals of the Cabinet for Health and Family Services, further research and development of resources are needed to identify methods of decreasing the number of placements a youth experiences while enhancing services that address needs of the individual child. Efforts to improve family/parental functioning are warranted as, despite being in foster care and having a history of abuse or neglect, the majority of youth will return to their families of origin – back to the same environment from which they were removed. Need is indicated for additional research, development of and access to resources, and enhanced methods of service delivery to address the specific needs of foster care youth and their families.

# Research Presentation

**Penny Butler**

**Roy McCoy**

**Clem McStoots**

**Kim Wilson**

# Introduction

- **Research Question**—What are the factors that influence a foster child's decision to extend commitment with the Cabinet upon reaching 18 years of age?
- **Importance to Social Work**—Results:
  - significantly influence delivery of services: independent living skills and provision of foster care services relating to child's future
  - support Social Work Code of Ethics mandating providing services to needy and advocating social justice
- **Purpose**—Examine factors that influence the decision to extend commitment to obtain educational, housing, and health benefits available to them
  - provide useful information for analyzing areas of improvement for foster care services and independent living curricula to better address a foster child's future



# Literature Review

- **50% of foster children are age 13 and over**
- **20,000 youth age out of foster care annually**
- **30-38% of foster children who turn 18 have not completed high school**
- **The average number of placements is two, however nearly 18% have had 6 or more placements**
- **Most children who do not recommit return to their families of origin**

# Literature Review

- Many foster children have drug or health issues that prevent them from being successful
- In 1998, the average time spent in out of home care was 21 months
- the average age of children coming into care is 9
- Congress changed the laws concerning foster children in 1997. In some states termination of parental rights must be pursued when a child has been in foster care 15 of the last 22 months

# Literature Review

- **The Foster Care Independent Act of 1999 (now renamed the Chafee Foster Care Independent Program) was designed to increase the ability of youth aging out of foster care to become self-sufficient. The act doubled the funding for independent living programs**
- **factors influencing successful “aging out” of the foster system and transitioning to adulthood and self-sufficiency include attachment, education, length of time in out of home care and availability of independent living programs**

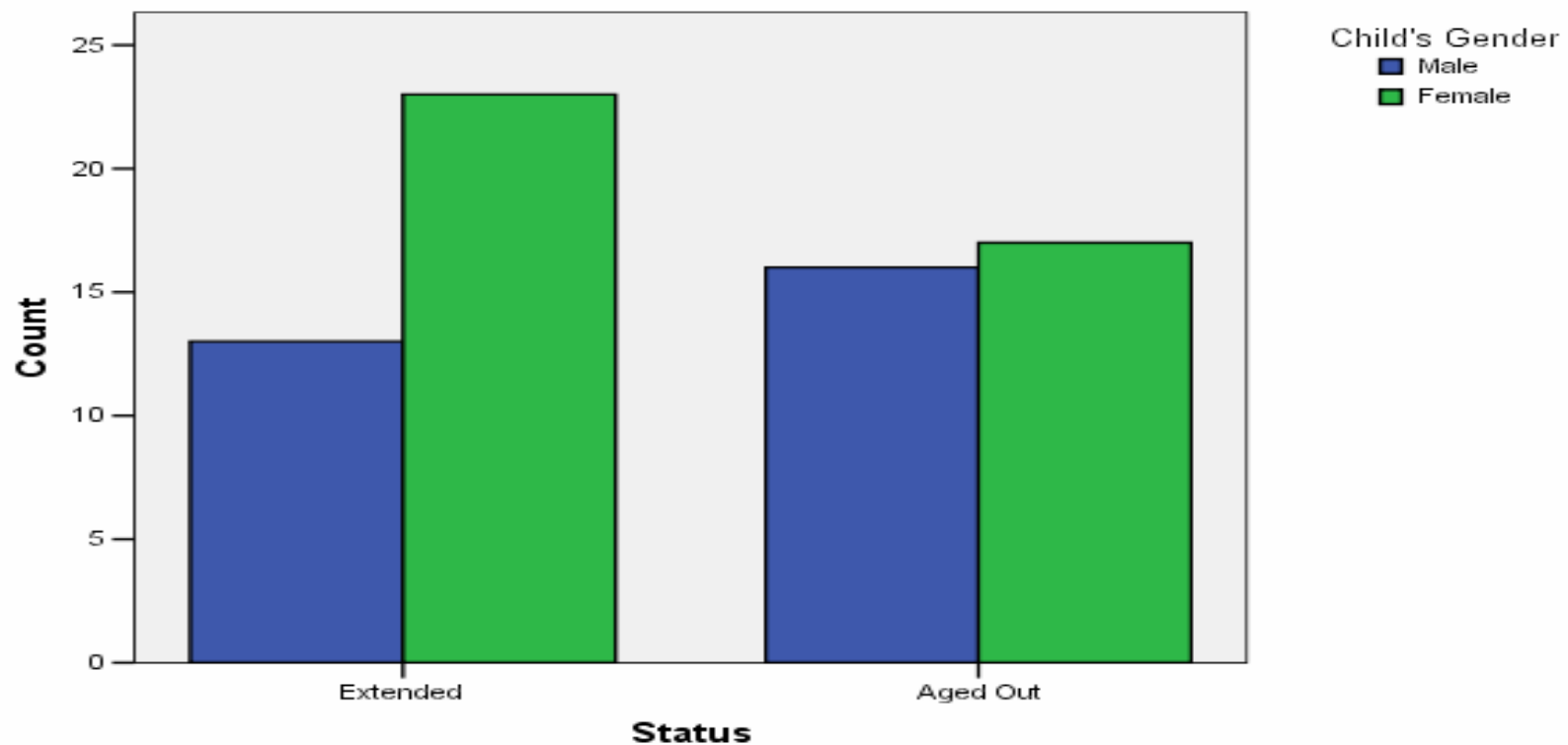
# Design and Sample

- **Study utilizes a pre-experimental research design, one group post-test only**
- **Researchers reviewed 69 randomly selected chart files of foster care youth turning 18 from Jan. 1-Dec. 31, 2004**
- **Study included 36 youth who extended commitment and 33 who did not, identifying factors influencing their decision**

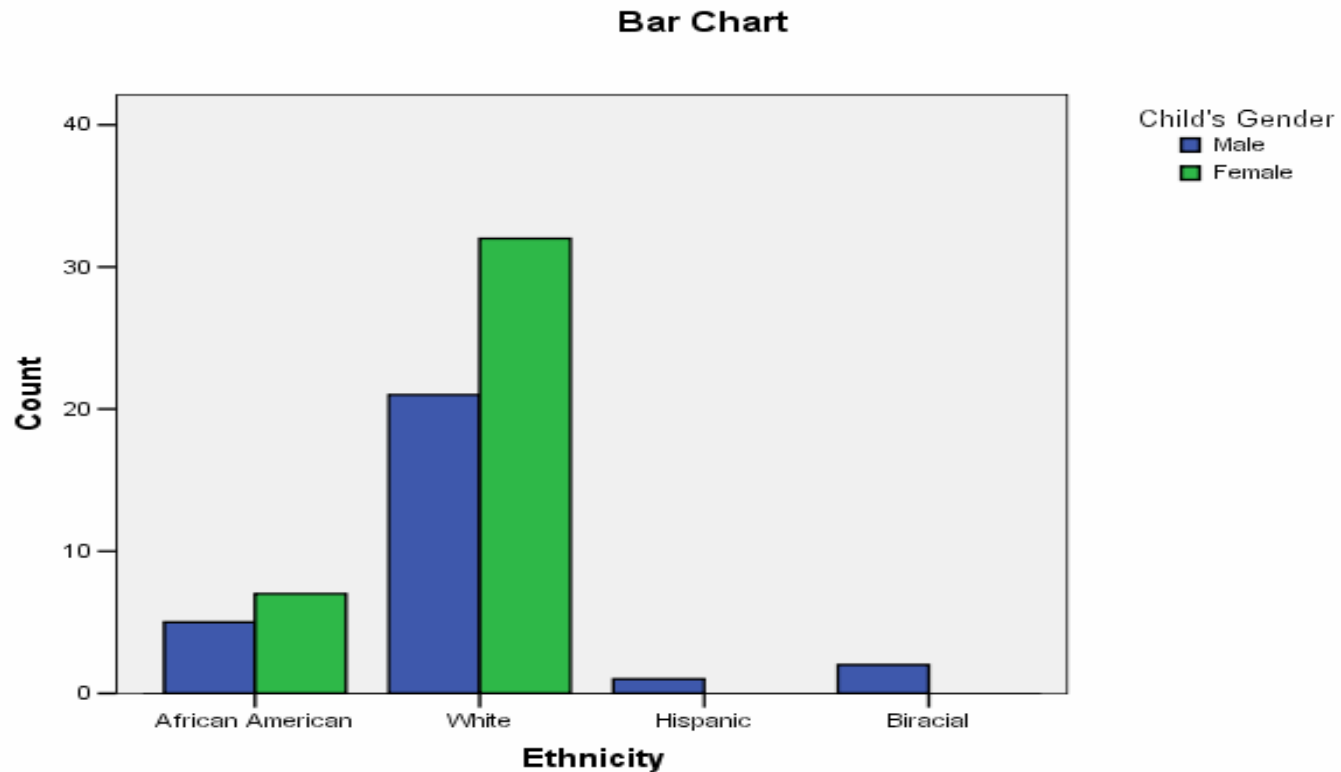
# Results

## Status-Gender

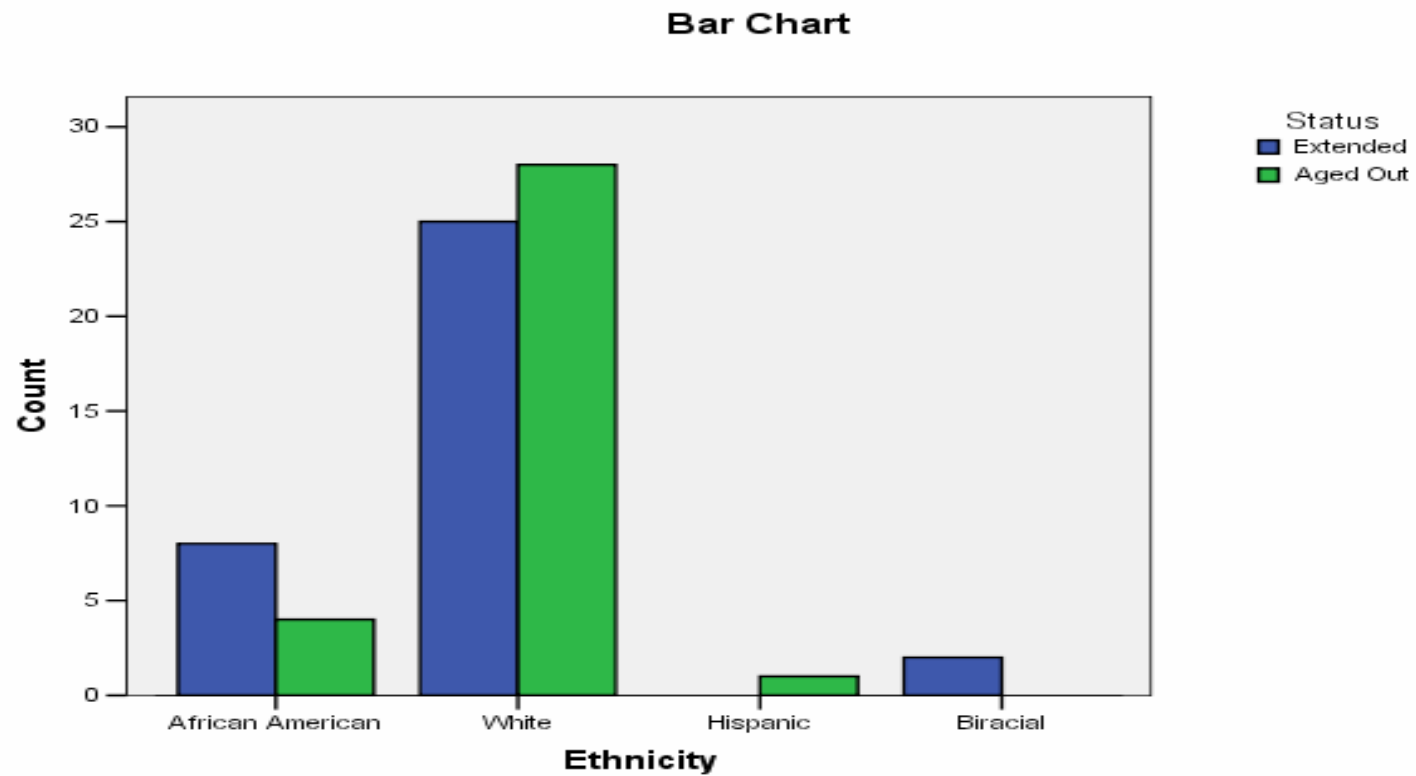
Bar Chart



# Ethnicity-Gender

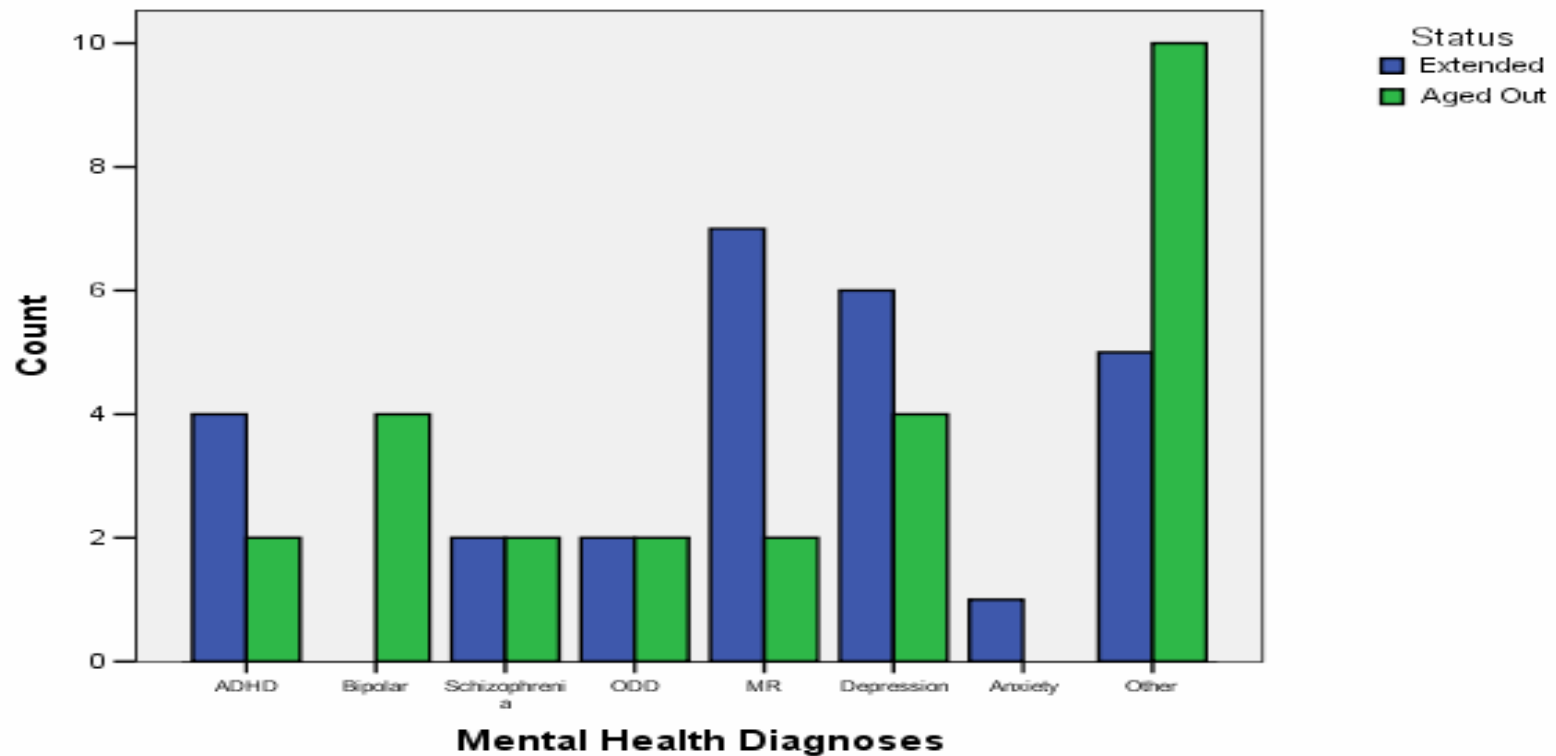


# Ethnicity-Status



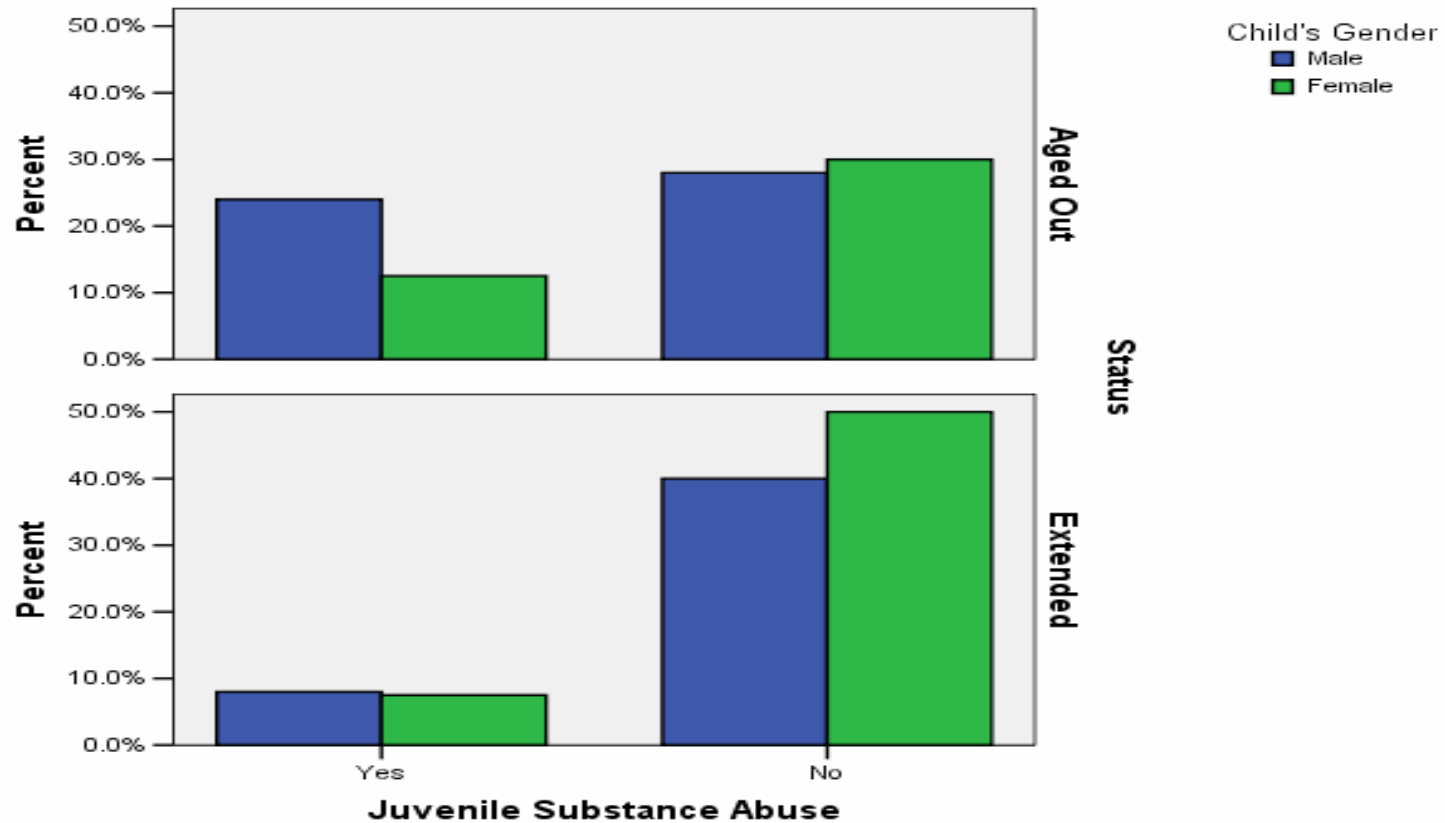
# Mental Health Diagnoses Status

Bar Chart



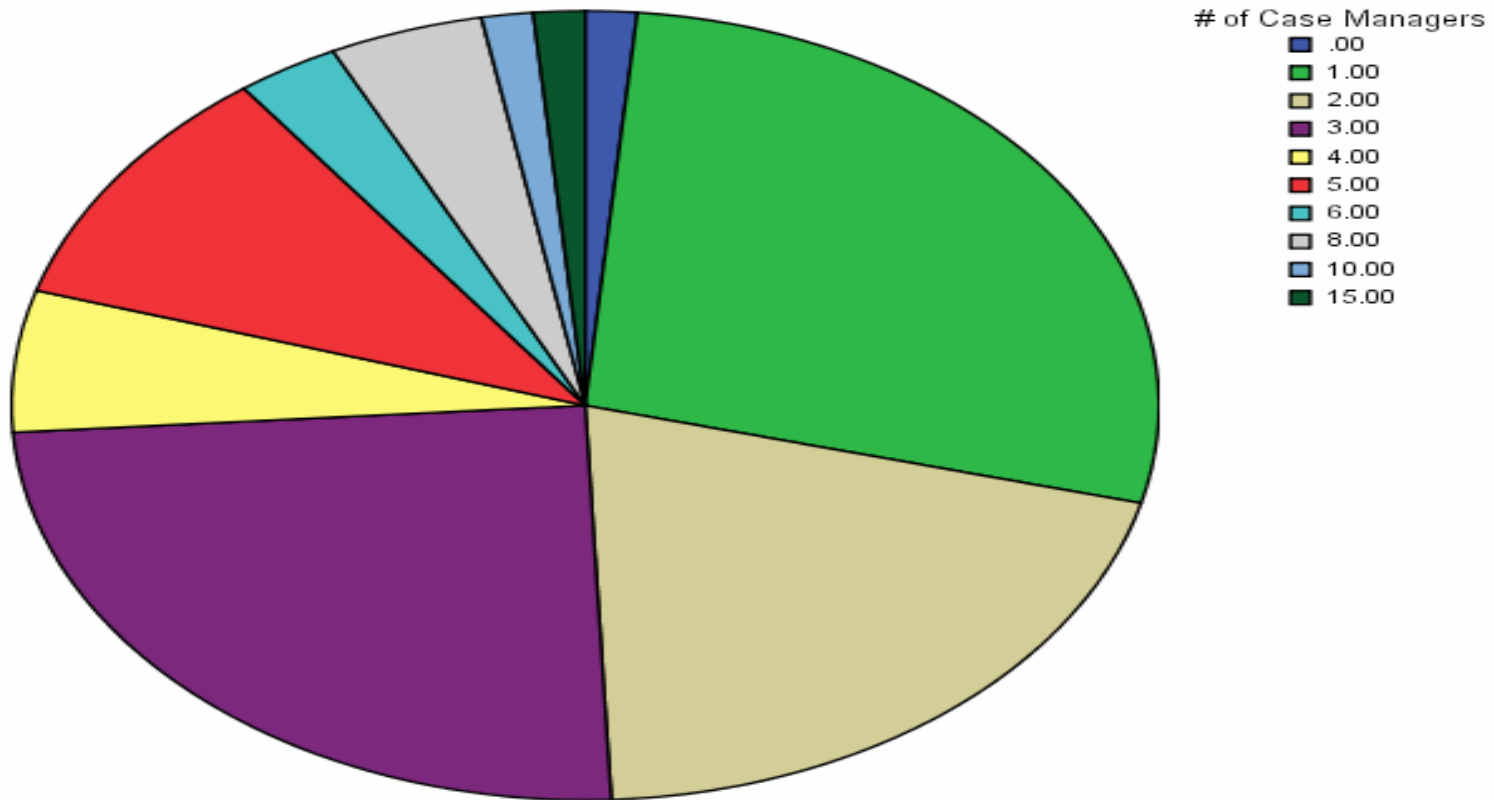


# Substance Abuse Status-Gender



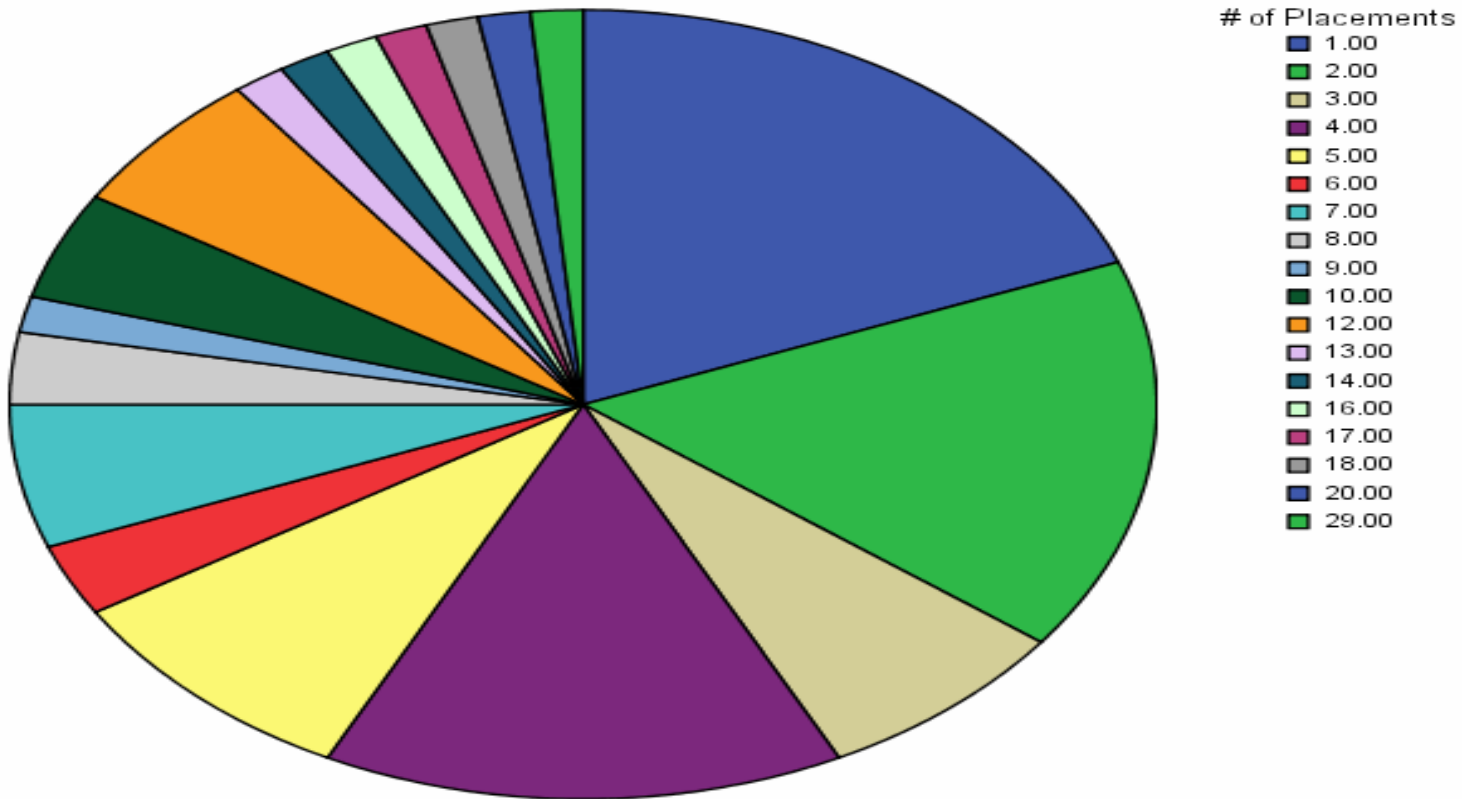
# Total Case Managers

Average # of case managers 2.5



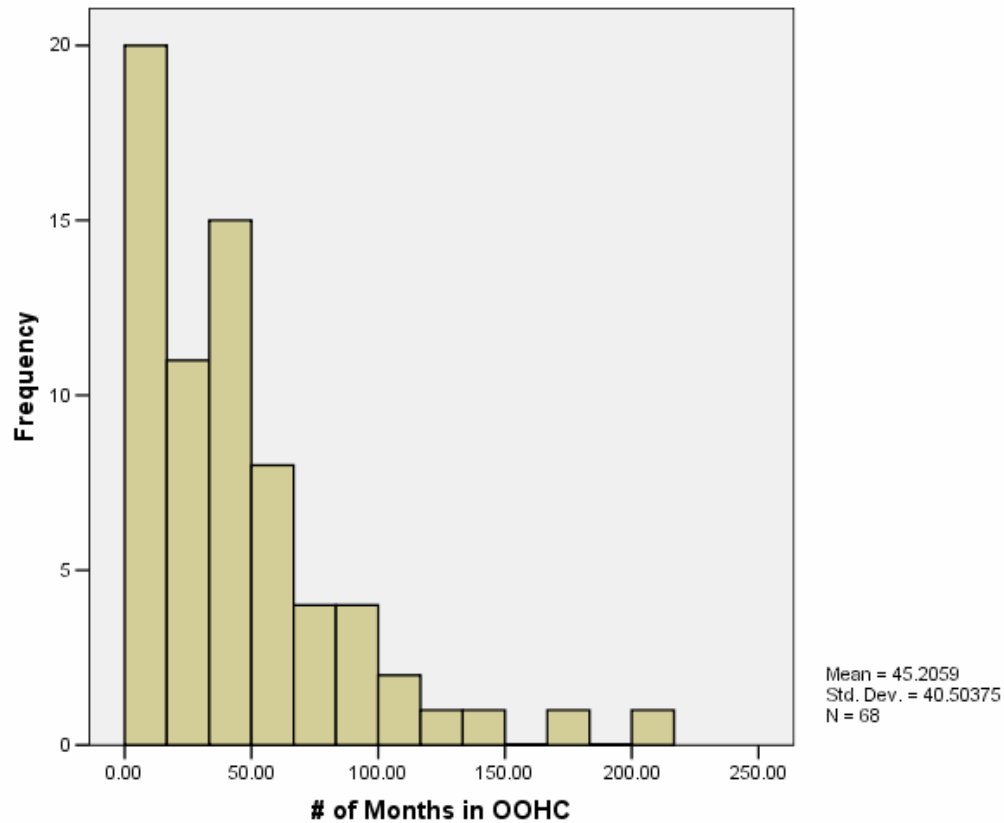
# Total Placements

45 had 5 or less, 12 between 6 and 19, 6 between 6 and 10,  
6 between 11 and 15, 4 between 16 and 20 and 1 had 29



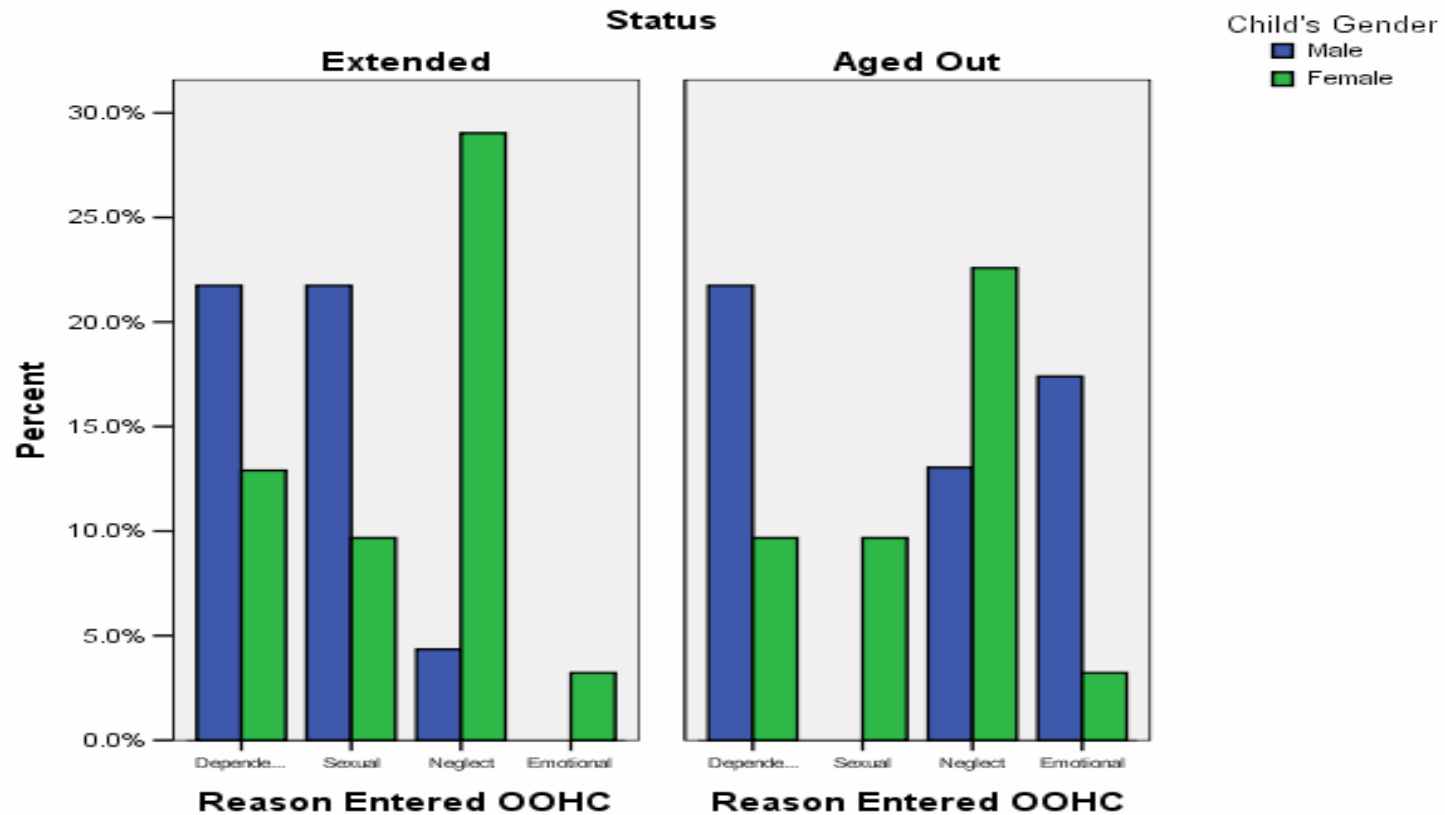
# Total Months OOHC

Average months in OOHC 45.7

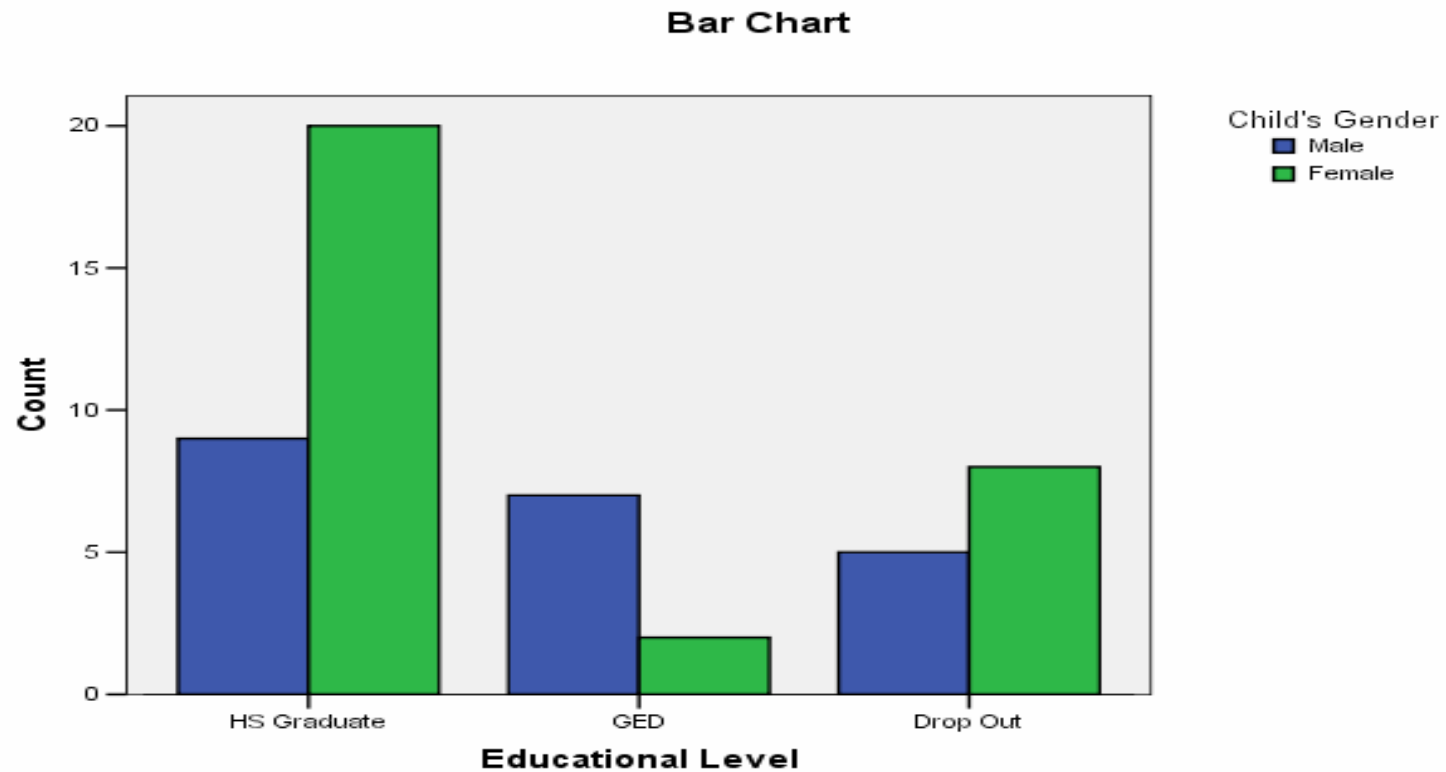


# Reasons Entered OOHC

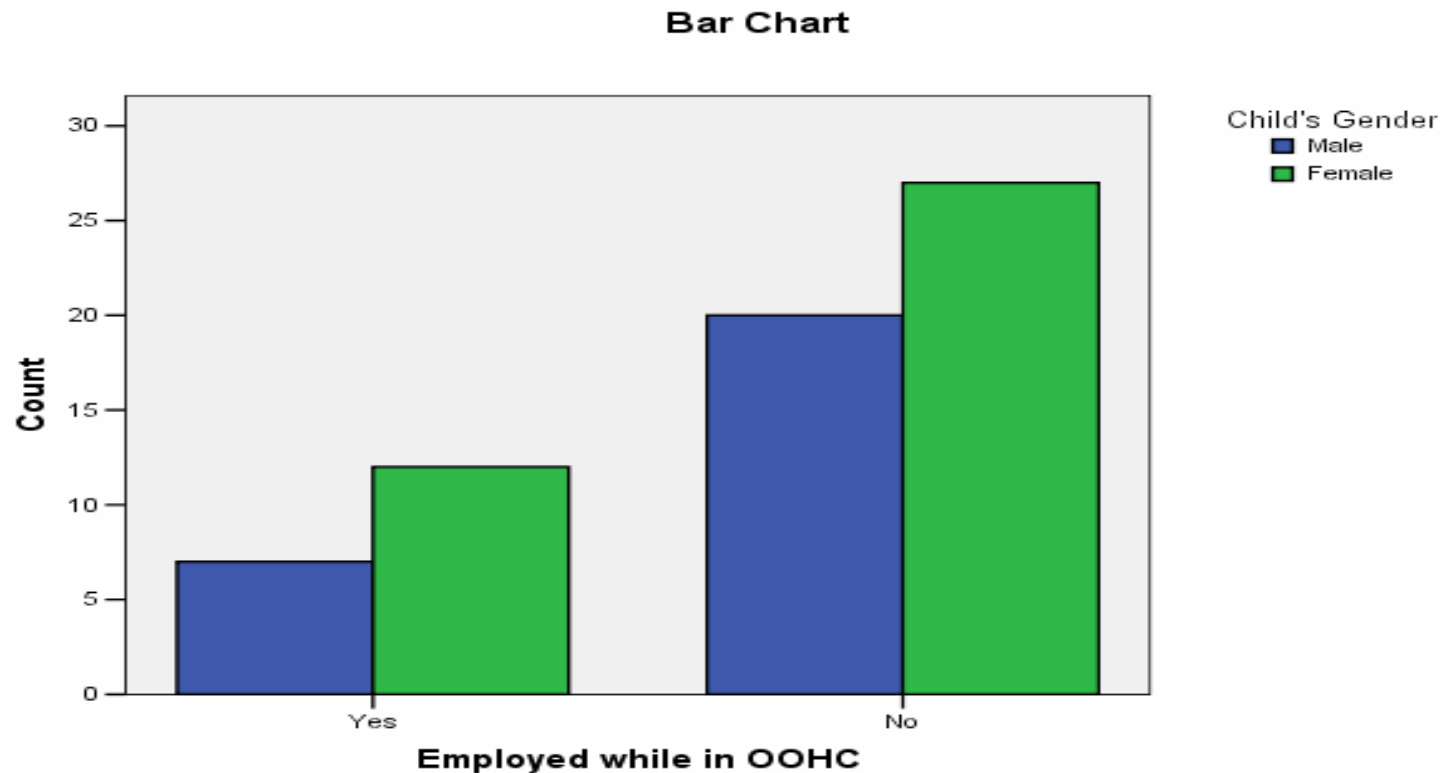
## Gender-Status



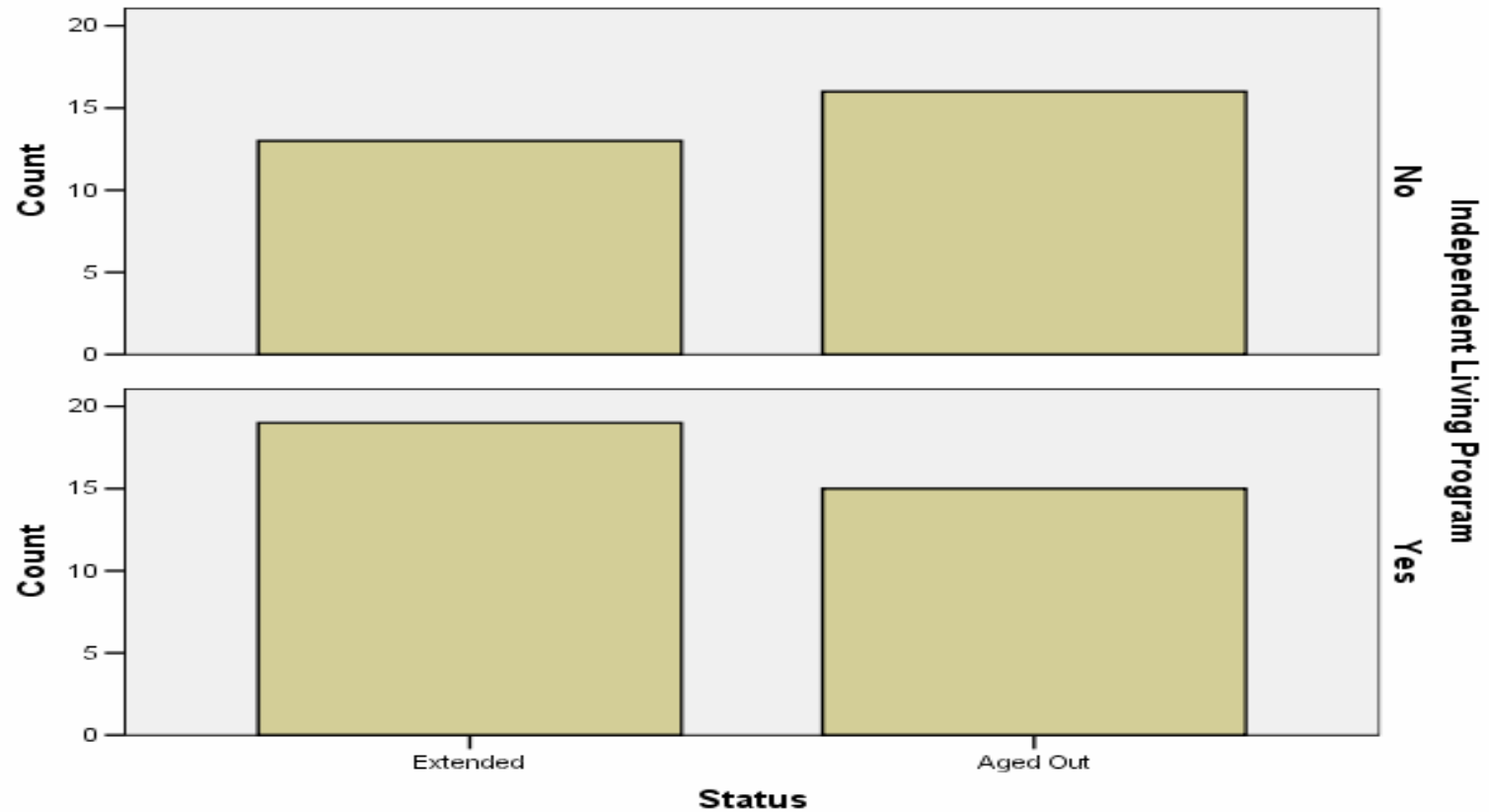
# Educational Level-Gender



# Employed While OOHC- Gender



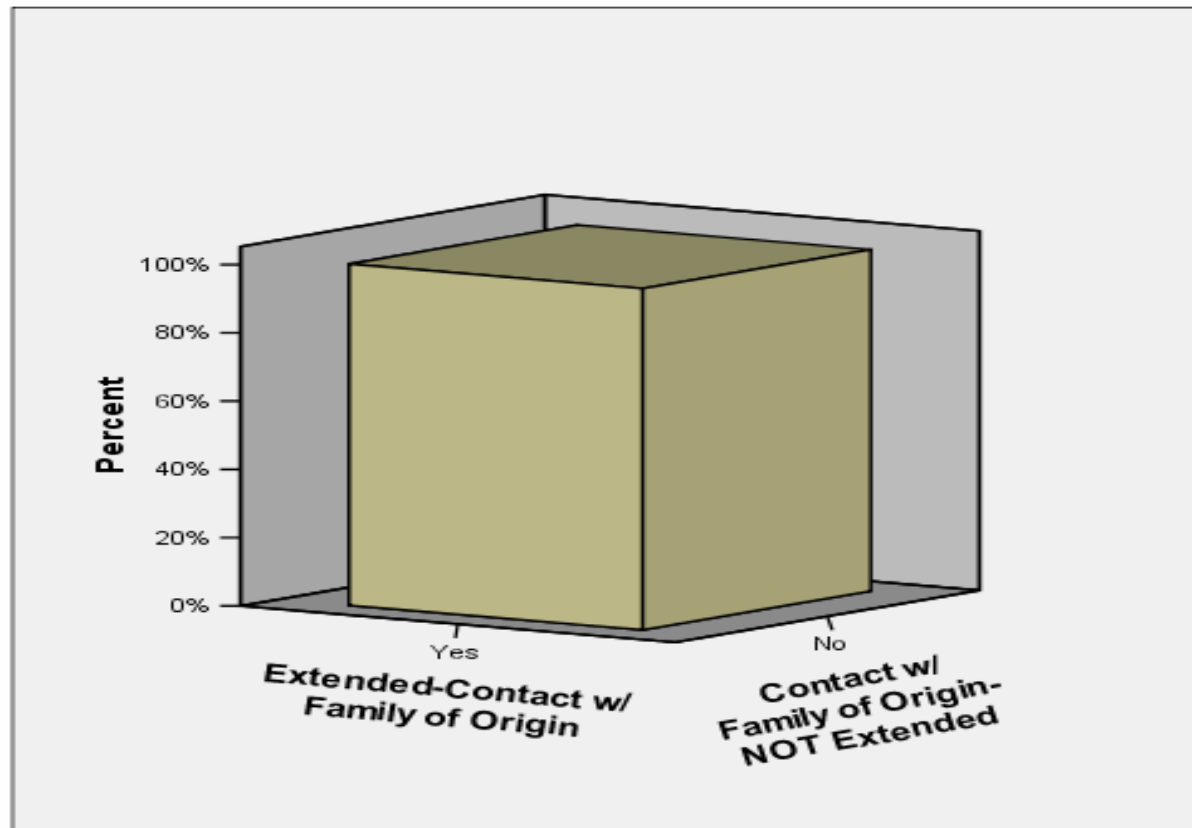
# Completed ILP Status



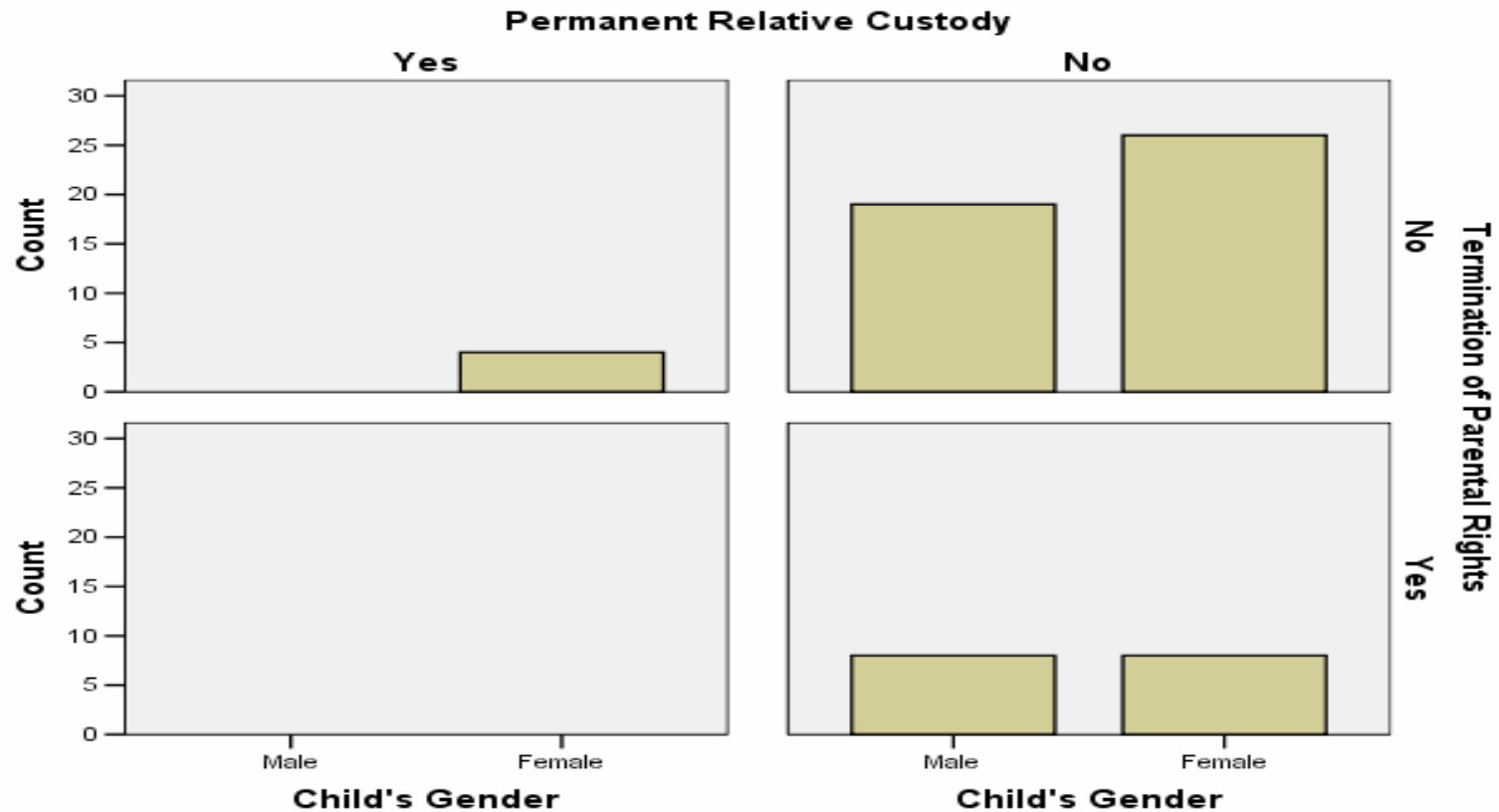


# Contact with Family of Origin

22 of 34 who extended and 23 of 27 of youth who aged out maintained contact with family of origin



# Permanent Relative Custody TPR-Gender



# Discuss Quantitative Study

**Researchers were unable to identify 100 youth that reached 18 during the allotted time frame of January 1, 2004 and December 1, 2004.**

**A total of 69 youth were identified. Of these 69 youth 36 extended commitment and 33 did not.**

**Girls spent average of 42.2 months in OOHC**

**Boys spent average of 49.3 months in OOHC**

**Girls more likely to be depressed than boys**

**Boys more likely to be diagnosed ODD**

**Girls were significantly more likely to graduate than boys**

**Girls were more likely to work while in foster care**

# Quantitative Study

- **Girls were more likely to be in permanent relative custody**
- **Of those who did not complete high school, boys were more likely to obtain a GED. Boys on average spent 49.3 months in out of home care compared to girls who averaged 42.2 months. Boys were more frequently diagnosed with ODD than girls**
- **Relationships were identified between 1) number of placements and number of case managers; 2) number of placements and status (extend/age out); 3) substance abuse and status (extend/age out); & 4) educational achievement and status (extend/age out).**
- **Trends were identified between 1) reason for entering out of home care and status offenders; & 2) employed while in foster care and educational achievement.**

# Design and Sample

- **Examining charts that provide qualitative data and extracting themes revealing factors that influence an adolescent's decision to recommit**
- **Applying methodology of in-depth chart review and organizing to identify commonalities; sampling frame consisting of 4 youth reaching 18 from Jan. 1-Dec. 31, 2004 in three regions**
- **Using secondary data, collecting information through charts, dispositional reviews, and TWIST**

# Themes and Commonalities

- Out of control behaviors were indicated in all 4
- Multiple placements
- Attachment issues-unloved-abandoned
- Poor family support and influence-felt unwanted
- Aggressive behaviors-angry-resistance to authority
- Inconsistent visitation with family of origin
- Child's social worker a positive influence in all 4 the cases, with 2 maintaining regular contact with their workers
- Extended commitment for educational purposes
- Two received above average grades
- Two failing or suspended

# Themes and Commonalities

- The long term effects of abuse and neglect surface with teens in OOHC leading to high number of placements which feeds the cycle of minimum attachment, bonding and stability
- Workers found ambivalence in children resulting in changing personal goals with thought, stressors leading to placement disruption, out of control behaviors, excessive anger, and issues with authority
- Both the individual and society will benefit if steps are taken to increase self-sufficiency and decrease the number who will seek public assistance after aging out of foster care

# Analysis/Conclusion

## Strengths

- More youth extended commitment than researchers anticipated
- Study suggests that enhancing services is beneficial
- Positive relationship between enhanced incentives and decision to recommit

## Weaknesses

- Inability to choose more than one option for a variable in data set
- Lack of information for youth who aged out
- Lack of information in chart reviews
- Lack of documentation from independent living workers

## Do Differently

- Include more options in data set in quantitative questions
- Interview Social Workers for qualitative data



